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OPINION

Canada turned the tide in May. We can win the pandemic war in June

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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Hyder Ali, 41, receives a Pfizer-BioNtech vaccination from registered nurse Julia Noce at a clinic at the Bramalea Civic Centre in Brampton, Ont., on May 17, 2021.

FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

On May 1, Canada was still in the thick of a devastating third wave. In Ontario, hospitalizations were hitting new records. In British Columbia, the curve was bending, but from the province's highest-ever level of infections. In Alberta, case numbers were still rising.

As the month started, only one-third of Canadians had received their first shot of vaccine. Supply had long been constrained; deliveries from one supplier, Moderna, had been repeatedly delayed or reduced. Most young and middle-aged Canadians weren't even eligible for a shot, whereas in the United States everyone over the age of 18 was.

What a difference a month makes.

As of Friday, the United States' first-shot level, despite a massive stockpile of vaccine, had crept up from 44 per cent at the start of the month to just 50 per cent. Over the same period, Canada's vaccination level jumped more than 20 points, to 55 per cent.

By June 1, the share of all Canadians with at least a first jab should be nearing 60 per cent.

In a single month, Canada will have vaccinated more than a quarter of the population, or almost as many people as in the previous four months.

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The country is still far from the finish line. Manitoba is still in the thick of it. But from coast to coast, cases have been falling sharply. Hospitalizations, too, though the numbers are still high, particularly in Ontario.

And Canadians remain exceptionally enthusiastic about getting vaccinated. Tens of millions of Americans may be passing up the opportunity, but Canadians aren't. They're using up the shipments of doses as soon as they arrive.

The stereotype of a Canadian as someone who loves to politely line up has never been so true, or so welcome.

Earlier this month, U.S. President Joe Biden set a goal of delivering a first shot to 70 per cent of American adults by July 4. Owing to American hesitancy, procrastination and disorganization, getting there is looking like a stretch.

And Canada? Despite a smaller vaccine supply, we're going to hit Mr. Biden's target in a matter of days. As of Friday, 63 per cent of Canadians 12 years of age or older had their first shot.

All of which sets us up for a promising June. The more vaccine Ottawa can secure, and the sooner it gets it, the more promising the month will be – and the better our chances of entering the postpandemic era sooner.

There is no magic number of vaccinations that instantly ends COVID-19, and there remain unknowns about new variants, and future variants. But we know that the more people get vaccinated, the better it is for each of them individually and all of us collectively. It greatly lowers the odds of infection, serious illness and death.

So Canada should be ambitious and set itself a high target. Aim to vaccinate 90 per cent of eligible people. There are about 33 million Canadians 12 years of age or older; vaccinating 90 per cent of them means roughly 30 million people need a shot. The full treatment is two jabs, so Canada needs 60 million doses.

The country has so far received and distributed 26 million doses. The Trudeau government's official schedule has 12.1 million doses of Pfizer vaccine arriving by the end of June, and on Thursday, it also announced two million Moderna doses by mid-June.

Tally it up, and that's roughly 40 million doses by July 1. That's enough to hit the ambitious first-shot target, plus give a second shot to a third of eligible Canadians by Canada Day.

What's more, Procurement Minister Anita Anand on Thursday and again on Friday said that "millions" more Moderna doses are coming in the second half of June. How many millions? Unknown. But by our calculations, Moderna is still nearly seven million shots short of what it was originally supposed to deliver in the second quarter.

Ms. Anand also said that one million AstraZeneca doses will arrive in late June – though that shipment is not yet firm enough to be in the official schedule.

In addition, Canada is to receive another 9.1 million Pfizer doses in July – and those are in the official schedule.

So out of a maximum need of 60 million shots, Canada is guaranteed to hit the 40 million mark by the end of June, and pass 50 million by the end of July. We're almost there.

If the Trudeau government can find a way to quickly acquire another 10 million doses – the Americans have fridges filled with far more than that – then every Canadian will get their second shot by late July or early August. That would be a lot better than a “one dose summer, two dose fall.”

Think bigger, Ottawa. Aim higher.

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